



DURING MUCH OF THE YEAR Becky Hahn cheerfully heads to her yoga mat in the morning, enjoying the deep breaths and Sun Salutations that leave her body humming.

But in the wintertime, it's a different story. From mid-October through April, Hahn feels mentally and physically drained. She struggles to get out of bed in the morning, withdraws from family and friends, and has a tough time coping with unexpected obstacles.

And it gets worse: A week before her period she becomes irritable, snaps at her loved ones, and then feels guilty—often to the point of tears—for her behavior. When cramps and bloating set in, she says, she doesn't feel like moving at all.

But she does—straight to her mat. Sometimes she has to drag herself there, but the 26-year-old Pennsylvania resident makes sure not to miss her practice. Her regular yoga sessions make her seasonal depression manageable and help motivate her when cramps leave her lethargic. When she started doing yoga five years ago, the change in her mood took a few weeks. But once she started feeling an effect, she says, "The sunshine was back."

If you suffer from seasonal depression—particularly if you're also prone to premenstrual syndrome—yoga could make a real difference. Recent studies have found that having PMS makes a person more likely to have seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, and good

When winter's gloom darkens your mood, yoga can brighten your days.

evidence exists that yoga can help minimize the effects of PMS. Unfortunately, little research has been done so far on how yoga affects SAD. But studies about how it can help alleviate other forms of depression, as well as theories about how both SAD and yoga affect the body, suggest that yoga can lessen SAD's symptoms. So if you struggle to keep your energy up and your

Lighten Up

let the sun shine in

**Need more help
with SAD and
PMS? Consider
these suggestions:**

Light Therapy

The best-studied treatment for SAD, light therapy, is also effective for women suffering from the more severe form of PMS, premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). Light therapy inhibits production of daytime melatonin in people with SAD and improves PMDD-related mood problems. You don't need a prescription to buy a light box. Studies differ on whether it's best to use one in the morning or at night; experiment to find out what works best for you.

St. John's Wort

This herbal antidepressant can be helpful for both PMS and SAD. Dosage recommendations are 300 mg, three times a day. But beware: St. John's Wort can interact with medications, including birth control pills, conventional antidepressants, and anti-HIV medications.

Vitamin D

While research has produced conflicting results, some studies have found that taking vitamin D, which our bodies naturally produce in the sun and which drops during the winter, may help ease SAD. The maximum dose is 2,000 IU per day in winter. H.B.

increased production of melatonin, which helps us feel sleepy, or its decreased production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that's thought to contribute to feelings of well-being.

Yoga may work by affecting the level of serotonin in the body, says Timothy McCall, MD, *Yoga Journal's* medical editor and the author of *Yoga as Medicine*. In his book he cites research showing that people suffering from depression who did yoga experienced an increase in serotonin and became more sociable. Though the study wasn't focused on SAD, McCall does say that things that work for other kinds of depression are likely to work for SAD.

And some studies have raised other explanations for this effect. A paper in

mood positive in the winter, yoga may be a doubly effective remedy. It can ease the PMS that's linked to seasonal depression, and it may lighten SAD directly.

BLUES IN THE DARK

At Breathing Time Yoga in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, yoga therapist Karen Lee can spot the SAD sufferers when they come to her class in late December.

"There's a kind of slumping over, slow movements, lack of affect," says Lee, who has studied yoga therapy with Viniyoga expert Gary Kraftsow (see *Yf Interview*, page 244, for more on Kraftsow). "Here in New England we can get three or four days of overcast, and by the fifth day the people with SAD are barely crawling around. You probe a little bit and discover they were depressed last winter too," she says.

Why is it that winter is so hard to take? Researchers don't fully understand the reasons, but it's thought that some people's bodies can't properly adjust their internal clocks to winter's shorter days. In particular, the trouble may lie with the body's

the journal *Medical Hypotheses*, for instance, suggested that the pineal gland, which converts serotonin to melatonin and helps regulate the body's circadian and seasonal rhythms, might actually be what the ancient yogis identified as the crown chakra.

Though there's been no research on this, the paper's author, psychiatrist Eric Leskowitz of the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston, speculates that the energizing effects of yoga and of specific breathwork aimed at this chakra may help get those rhythms back in sync.

"Whether you look at it as the crown chakra or the pineal gland, they both relate to how we connect to the cosmos," Leskowitz explains. "It doesn't matter if you're talking about being connected to the sun and the stars spiritually or in our seasonal rhythms."

MENDING THE MIND

However yoga affects the body, it also teaches you about the workings of your "monkey mind." In particular, you learn

how to handle dark feelings that might otherwise overwhelm you.

“Learning to witness your feelings without getting wrapped up in negativity is a big part of yoga,” says Lee. “And yogic mantras can help people focus on the positive. Both are important.”

Hahn concurs. “Yoga connects my mind and body,” she says. “It gets the two working together and makes it easier for me to control a lot of the physical manifestations of my depression.”

Lee and McCall both say that yogic treatment for depression is very individual. It varies based on the type of depression you have and how you react to specific poses at different points in your practice. For women who also have PMS, treatment depends on where you are in your menstrual cycle; PMS-related depression tends to be worst after ovulation. And, of course, if your depressive symptoms are severe, don't go it alone—consult a physician or a therapist.

As for what type of yoga is best for PMS and SAD, Lee suggests pranayama followed by restorative poses. Leskowitz says that Kundalini Yoga's breathwork and some seventh-chakra-oriented poses in hatha yoga, such as Headstand, may also improve SAD symptoms. And some women find that practicing before dawn, perhaps by the light of a few candles, can be a gentle way to start the day.

Whatever you choose, McCall suggests practicing at least a few minutes each day. One key finding of the research he cites in *Yoga as Medicine* is that yoga's effects appear slowly but are long lasting.

“You change brain architecture by repeating actions again and again, which strengthens the links between brain cells,” he explains. “The best way to forge and strengthen new neural pathways is to practice every day. It can be as little as 5 to 10 minutes, though you're likely to get greater benefit if you do more. So I'd say start with a small amount and, if you can maintain it, increase slowly over time.”

With any luck, you'll feel energy bubbling up from within and be ready to face your day, clouds and all. ■

Heather Boerner is a writer in San Francisco.